

CONFRONTING WHITE SUPREMACY

By MATT HARPER

The history of the United States is filled with countless examples of overt, racist state violence: Indigenous genocide, African slavery, Mexican “Repatriation,” Japanese internment, the War on Drugs. Our history is also filled with countless examples of overt, racist violence carried out by individuals and mobs and condoned by the state. Some acts of hate blur the line between the state and individuals.

Since the inauguration of Donald Trump, racism has, once again, reared its overt, violent and vitriolic head, both on the individual and state levels. From Santa Monica, California to Charlottesville, Virginia to Puerto Rico, much of the racist hate and violence goes unchecked and is often not called what it really is: terrorism.

Here in Los Angeles specifically, and California more generally, many white communities pride ourselves on being liberals, progressives, Democrats. We are comfortable labeling vulgar words of hate, brutal acts of violence, and blatantly discriminatory policies as “racist.”

When we consider racism on a systemic level, many of us have not moved past a simplistic framework for understanding oppression. In the most popular analysis, oppressors stand at the top and use their power and privilege to marginalize people below them. For racism, this binary model of oppression holds the power-FULL as a monolithic group (white people) who enact racism over the power-LESS monolith (people of color). When considering the actions of overt racists, this makes perfect sense, but trying to extend the framework farther leads to breakdowns.

First, at the heart of this framework’s breakdown is the fact that no group exists simply as a monolith. Each person’s unique assortment of identities interacts in complex ways. We are more than one part of ourselves. As Kimberly Crenshaw recognized, “For those who stand in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you’re likely to get hit by both.” This “intersectionality” highlights the compounding impact of marginalization. The opposite reality is true for those with dominant identities. A white male has more compounding privileges than a white trans woman. This is not to negate or wash away the racial privilege all white people receive, but rather to recognize that privileges exist in layers.

Second, this oppressed/oppressor binary offers no incentives for white people to live differently. In this binary, white people can only fall on the side of the oppressor and only receive privileges. To try and exist any other way is a fiction. This model erases the history of white people doing the deep personal, interpersonal, cultural, and systemic work. There is no recognized, historical alternative to toxic whiteness in this binary despite there actually being a long and beautiful history of anti-racist white people struggling to create an alternative white identity. So what is the value of forfeiting those benefits?

Before proceeding, a clarification on culpability is needed. Just because a white person acknowledges racism exists, donates to charities, goes to rallies, and is friendly with a person of color at their work site does not mean they do not perpetuate racism. In addition to the overt acts of hate, there is a whole sea of covert acts that even the best-intentioned white people perpetuate. Often, too, we accept privileges for our own benefit, rather than using them to help dismantle unjust systems.

Additionally, in this sort of binary model, power and privilege get conflated as if they are the same thing. Power is the ability to have direct influence on legislation, culture, and institutions. As Jesse Myerson quotes in, “White Anti-Racism Must be Based in Solidarity, Not Altruism,” David Kaib identifies “two faces of privilege.” The first includes ones access to well-compensated employment, quality healthcare, and minimal criminalization. And although they are called privileges, Myerson reminds us that they should really be called human rights. He goes on to caution that we would be better served not to conflate human rights as privileges. The other privilege, though, is the societal privilege to dominate discussions, control spaces, normalize my experience and feel entitled to the body of another person. Though, statistically, white people have more access to these two privileges than people of color, and though white people are more likely to find themselves in managerial positions (with some institutional power over people of color), these are a far cry from the power to influence national and international government and institutions.

Finally, this oppressor/oppressed model seems to suggest that racism itself is the problem. Stop being racist and everything will get better. Though

racism is a problem it is not the problem. Rather, it is a tool of a greater system (white supremacy) with a more nefarious purpose than just hate (something we will return to later).

For some, this may feel awkward or new. When I first heard this, I remember thinking, “If this is the case, why am I only learning about it now?” Part of the reason we do not learn anything deeper (and thus have not dug deeper into this) is because systems of power do not want us to understand the true structure of society. It is not in the interests of power to keep people educated. As a picture on the wall of my community’s living room says, “Truth is the first casualty of war.” Misinformation, fake news, and state-controlled narratives are all tactics of power. “When the system is hidden, it obscures the role of the white ruling elite, the complexity of difference amongst white people, and the power of white people and people of color uniting to create a road to fundamental change” (Goldberg & Levin article).

Additionally, many of us have not dug deeper because the accusations of being a part of a racist system, even perpetuating racism, conflicts with our belief and knowledge of ourselves. This challenges the very quality of how we have tried to live, and this accusation seems to offer little hope for redemption. To be complicit in racism seems like an indictment of our values, self-perception, and very lives, from which there seems to be no return.

Another reason many of us have not dug deeper is because our questions and doubts about this binary model have lead us to abandon more critical thinking and engagement with the topic. Questions like: Are all white people really making calculated and intentional efforts at suppressing people of color’s access to power, to their basic necessities? Are all white teachers, electricians, paramedics, small business owners really the ones controlling the system of exploitation? What about the unemployment/underemployment, eviction, poor health, and addiction that many white people and families face? What about wealthy people of color? While these questions each require deep analysis and exploration, it is an understandable hang-up for those not accustomed to exploring these issues to be unsatisfied with the binary framework when considering these complex realities. And rather than considering that our understanding of the system of racism

may just not be deep enough, many of us assume it is completely wrong and exit the conversation entirely.

Therefore a new model is needed to more accurately understand the reality around us, to influence how we move forward, and to inspire people to do the necessary work to struggle for change.

So where does the power presently reside? There is a small group of people, roughly one-fourth of the the top 1% of the wealthiest in the country, who “influence, control, and shape policy, culture, and institutions through governmental bodies, economic practices, cultural and media-propagated ideology and imagery” (AWARE-LA). These “Ruling Elite” are dominated by white, cisgender, Christian, wealthy men and it is them who have the deepest vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

And while most people at the top share similar identities, not all white, class-privileged men have this power. The truth is that most white people are far from this lived experience. Many struggle in real ways. That said, while white people may experience marginalization because of another identity—class, gender/sex, ability, educational background—under white supremacy, their whiteness privileges them (even though they do not have the same level of investment in maintaining the system as the Ruling Elite do). People of color, on the other hand, are not privileged racially. They are the main targets of discrimination, of sweeping generalizations and stereotypes, of criminalization, exploitation, state-based violence and, sometimes, worse.

And while most white people and people of color have a lot of mutual interest, they have been kept from joining together. “The Ruling Elite uses intersecting systems of oppression to divide and exploit groups of people, all in turn perpetuating their exclusive power and extracting profit, submission, and compliance from oppressed groups” (AWARE-LA). Racism is a tool used to maintain a system of white supremacy. Just as sexism is a tool to maintain a system of patriarchy, it is not the problem itself. Ruling Elites pit white people against people of color, middle class people against poor and working class people, men against women, trans, and gender nonconforming people. Under all these and all other systems of oppression (heteronormativity, classism, ableism...), “there are norms that oppress culturally, ... policies that oppress institutionally, and...practices that oppress interpersonally” (AWARE-LA).

The privileges that come from being in the “dominant” groups are a “direct incentive to maintain the status quo” (AWARE-LA). It is a way to buy off allegiance and avoid resistance. Whether people of privilege know it or not, we see the ways that systems of oppression work in peoples’ real lives, we see the carrots dangled before our eyes, and we pursue paths that keep us away from a harder go of things, including reaping the unfair benefits of our whiteness simply for our own good. Even the very concept of “whiteness” was created to divide poor, indentured whites and black slaves in a plantation-based economy,” (AWARE-LA) the hope being that by offering some small benefits to white people, they would support the system of racial subjugation through the acceptance of (or even participation in) the slave economy. The same happens today.

Rather than seeing ourselves as having more in common with the Ruling Elite (which is a sentiment Trump has done very well in imparting throughout much of the white population), we need to see our connection to those who are marginalized, especially those more so than whatever marginalized identities we may hold. Whites are not guaranteed an easy life, as many have found; but the “promise” (the lie) that we just have to work harder to get to where we will have our needs met keeps many of us in allegiance with the very entity stripping us of our access to basic rights. We compromise, work overtime, and tolerate countless abuses because of this lie. We must recognize that we exist within cultural norms that are problematic. Given all of that, this is fertile ground for alliance building, but we must do the work to ensure our racial privilege will not act as a barrier and liability to building trust.

We must explore all of our identities and consider where we are encouraged to accept privileges and human rights at the expense of others with different identities. We must ask how many of our needs are not getting met. The benefits that come from being white, able-bodied, Christian, college-educated, class-privileged and a cisgender male are used to win me over. And when we are so afraid of “losing” (economic security, healthcare, employment, access to good schools), we bite our tongues and let things continue around us because they seem too big to stop. We do not understand how it is to our benefit, in our personal interest, to come together with people of color to dismantle white supremacy. So, what

do we do? How do white people move forward? What do we really have at stake, really have to gain from making the hard but necessary investment in challenging the systems of and people in power? That, my friends, is the next article. Ω

Matt Harper is a Los Angeles Catholic Worker community member.

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